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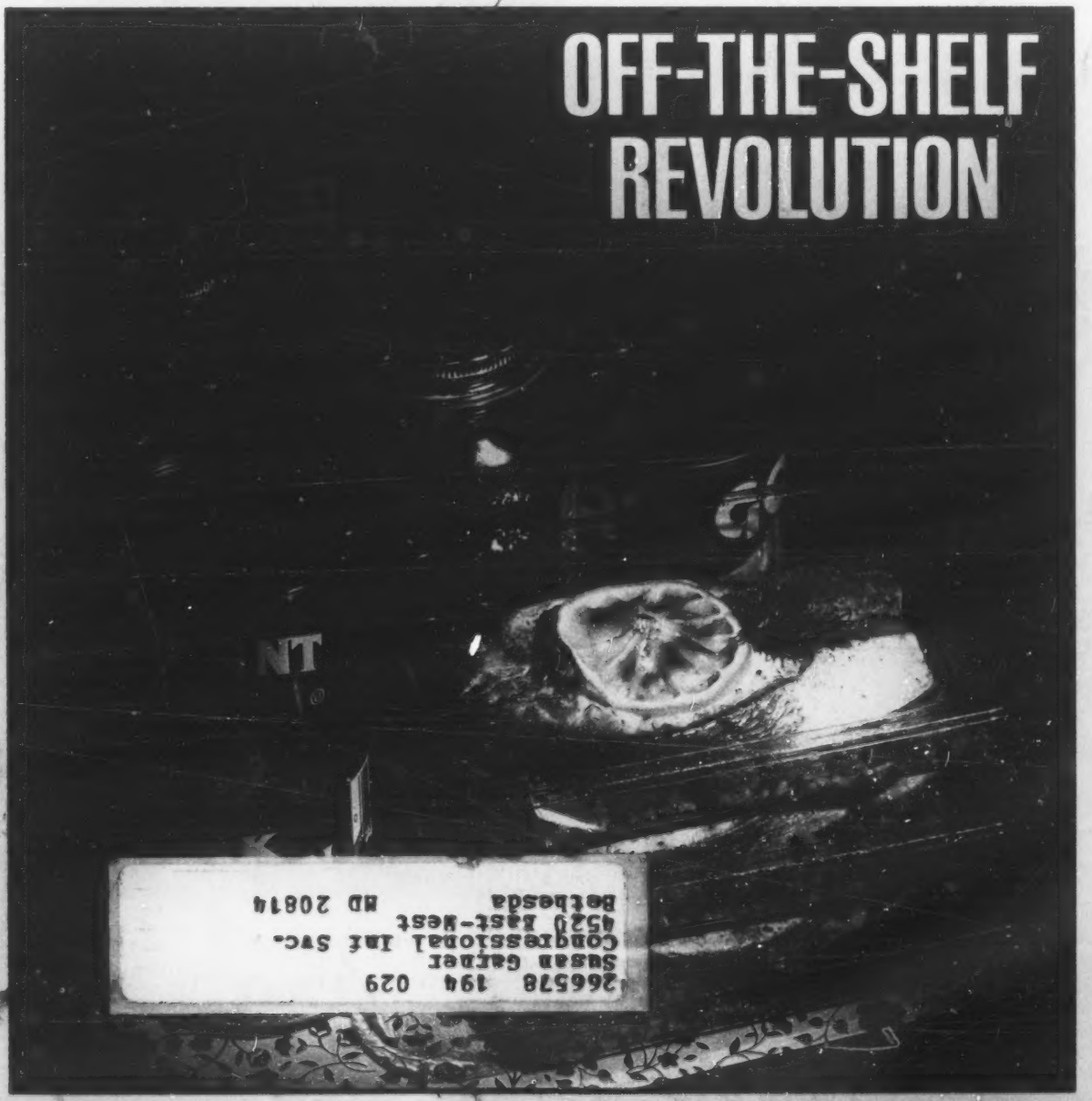
CHILTON'S SEPTEMBER 1989

FOOD ENGINEERING

SINCE 1928, THE SOURCE ON PROCESSING, PACKAGING, AND PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT

OFF-THE-SHELF REVOLUTION



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FOOD ENGINEERING

COVER STORY

Changing lifestyles and the new technologies of barrier plastics and microwave cooking are sparking a second revolution in convenience foods. The tray and lidstock materials are from the family of polyester resins produced by Eastman Chemical Products, Inc. Kingsport, TN.

Pages 69 to 82

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News

13 Industry Report
This month's Report features the Ferruzzi Group's response to the "soybean shootout" and suggestion of CBOT reform; U.S. companies' strategies for business in Europe after 1992; a new Senate bill for mandatory seafood inspection; and a labeling bill also introduced in the Senate.

25 Marketplace
Juice-based drinks are forecasted to be the fastest growing drink category.

33 Packaging

Departments

9 Editorial
10 Calendar
13 Industry Report
25 Marketplace
33 Packaging
112 New In Print
130 People

JUICE-BASED DRINKS: PAGE 25

Engineered Foods

43 Microwaveable Dry Mixes
A new line of three easy-to-disperse modified instant starches are recommended for a variety of microwaveable items.

46 Low-fat, Low-sodium Meats
Multifunctional flavorings aid in developing "healthier" processed meats with acceptable taste and texture.

51 Protein Enzymatic Hydrolysis
Enzymatic hydrolysis of proteins to produce flavorings, dietary supplements and other products can result in a bitter taste.

54 Microwaveable Cakes
Microwave cooking creates problems that can be overcome by the use of hydrocolloids as water binding and texturizing agents.

59 Chelating Agents
Current research is examining the role of chelating agents in an expanding array of uses.

60 Lower Alcohol Beverages
A new generation of beverages will have lower alcohol levels.

62 Choices—Labeling Legislation

66 Literature

MICROWAVE DRY MIXES: PAGE 43

CHILTON FOOD GROUP

Features

69 Convenience Foods
Canning, freezing and drying technologies created the first wave of convenience foods. Today, changing lifestyles plus the new technologies of barrier plastics and microwave cooking are sparking the second convenience foods revolution. New technologies may accelerate the trend.

85 Sensors
Sensors are becoming an integral part of the process control system, providing information on conditions in the manufacturing area that formerly were measured manually.

From the Field

91 Large food service operation feeds 46,000 employees
96 Fulscope identifies temperature fluctuations
101 Drop forming breaks chocolate mold with new applications
102 Improved dehydration drum preserves fresh food flavor
107 Distiller recycles steam using thermocompressors
108 Single cell oil: a technology looking for applications

New Equipment

116 Processing Equipment
121 Packaging Equipment
124 Instruments/QC

THERMOFORM TRAYS: **PAGE 69**

SINGLE LEAF DOOR: **PAGE 91**

Special Emphasis

SENSORS

Since higher levels of automation became popular in food processing, sensors have been thrust to the forefront of the arena.

Pages 85 to 88

READ IT AND WIN
AD CONTEST
For readers and advertisers
See pages 141 to 143.

How to Cut Food Products

The food processing industry throughout the world requires that food products be uniformly size reduced – sliced, diced, shredded, comminuted, etc. – into an almost endless array of different sizes and shapes.

Controlled size reduction is not only important to product appearance, it may be critical to other processes in the production system.

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CHOICES

Kristen McNutt, Ph.D., J.D.

WILL FOOD LABELING LEGISLATION HELP CONSUMERS?

Understanding our failures before improving the system.

Revision of nutrition labeling regulations promises to be a hot topic with the 101st Congress. New legislation will, no doubt, create significant costs to the food industry which will be passed on to consumers.

Making change may be politically smart for legislators. It could demonstrate industry's responsiveness to consumers. But moving ahead without the proper analysis could be an expensive exercise in futility. Trade-offs between various lobbying groups might result in throwing out some things which are potentially useful. The new rules might be no better, perhaps even worse, than what we now have unless we first figure out why the current labeling system has failed.

The objective of nutrition labeling

The nutrition information panel on food labels is a tool for consumer education. But criticizing the labeling system for not having educated consumers about diet and health is like condemning cigarette package warnings for failing to reduce deaths from lung cancer and heart disease.

With this limitation in mind, the objective of labeling becomes: *to provide information which can be used directly by consumers and by health educators to help consumers select a total diet and choose among product options.*

Reasonable expectations

The narrow focus of "labeling legislation" encompasses only the nutrition information panel. Anyone who expects miracles from simply changing these regulations will be sorely disappointed. A far more comprehensive bill is required should Congress address other tools for helping consumers make food choices. Bringing standardized foods within nutrition labeling requirements, defining terms such as lite or light, quantifying "reduced, low, very low, and x-free" and harmonizing FDA's and USDA's regulations might improve the usefulness of the label, even as it stands today.

Ideally, the nutrition panel will complement the efforts of professional associations, quasi-government agencies such as the National Research Council and health voluntaries; but Congress has no power to direct the messages of these groups. Changing the nutrition information panel will have little or no effect on brand-specific, disease-prevention claims which are commonly referred to as health claims. Nor will such legislation reach what food manufacturers can say about their products to health professionals who then pass the word on to consumers.

Flexibility for 2005

Although piecemeal amendments have been made over the years, the last major nutrition labeling revision occurred 16 years ago. Should the changes made by the 101st Congress last as long, we'll have to live with them until the year 2005.

A long range perspective increases today's legislative challenge. It emphasizes the need for a new labeling system to deal with gaps in our current scientific knowledge, for example the physiological effects of various fatty acids, the factors affecting the bioavailability of minerals and the currently tentative understanding we have of diet and cancer. New regulations should provide ways of handling future topics about which we know as little today as we knew in 1973 about dietary fiber.

Dearth of labeling education

Misplacing the blame for labeling's failures could lead to our repeating mistakes. The flaw could be our not having learned how to use it.

In the early 1970s the National Nutrition Consortium commissioned Ron Deutsch, with input from an extensive group of advisors, to write a mini-manual which explained nutrition labeling to consumers. Concurrently, FDA developed print and audiovisual materials. Professional groups and food companies prepared pamphlets and developed other educational programs. More recently, however, labeling education has been overshadowed by emphasis on diet and chronic disease.

Industry has followed this trend by giving greater attention in consumer education materials to defensive rath-

Letters	54
Responses received	42
Sent more nutritive value charts without any explanation	19
Specific request addressed in company's response	21
Letter with enclosures explained nutrition panel	5
Printed material specifically about nutrition labeling	4
Some attempt to explain in letter	8
Printed material with minor mention of nutrition labeling	4
Response included "discuss with your doctor"	4
Tried to phone me	2
Letter on irrelevant topic	5

Source: Consumer Choices Unlimited, Inc.

er than offensive eating advice. In February, I wrote under a pseudonym to 54 food companies, using the address printed on product labels. And I published an abbreviated version of my findings in the August issue of *Food Engineering*. Let me present the full picture here. Forty had the nutrition information panel and 14 did not. The first letter, to the manufacturers of nutritionally labeled products, read: "The doctor says my blood needs more iron and my husband does not want to eat fat. I like your [product name] but I can't understand the nutrition number on the [location on the container]. Will you please explain to me what they mean." The second letter, to those not nutritionally labeled, asked about the nutrition in their product and why they didn't put information on their labels.

The lack of response from twelve companies may be due to incomplete address information on the product labels but the post office did not return any letters. The first 30 percent of responses, most of which just sent more nutritive value charts which I had already said I didn't understand, arrived within two weeks. The last 30 percent came more than five weeks after I had mailed my request. The content of the responses supports the hypothesis that industry is poorly prepared to explain this part of the label to consumers.

What's worth saving?

Labeling legislation amendments should salvage what is potentially useful. Retaining what consumers now know how to use would be better than asking them to start over completely learning a totally new system.

Calories per serving seems worth keeping. This section might be more helpful if we highlighted the importance of consistent intra-product serving sizes. The U.S. RDA is also a viable concept. Although many health professionals still don't even understand this standard, it does obviate the need for consumers to deal with milligrams, micrograms, and international units. The relative effectiveness of presenting percent U.S. RDA in absolute numbers versus pie or bar charts is a researchable question.

The label has been criticized because it gives *food* information in grams, whereas health educators give *diet* advice in percentages. For example, today's label easily shows consumers that whole milk contains 10 grams of fat and two percent milk only five. But the 10 and the five are not being translated by nutritionists into information that fits their advice to restrict dietary fat to 30 percent of calories.

Some simple arithmetic, using information already on the label, can help. All you need to do is estimate your calorie intake, drop the zero from that number and divide by three. For example, 2,100 calories becomes 210; dividing by three gives 70—you've got the grams of fat which you can eat and stay within the 30 percent recommendation. Now that five gram difference between whole versus skim milk shown on labels is useful information.

The current label can also easily tell consumers the approximate percentage of calories from fat in a product, versus from protein and carbohydrate. Since so many products contain no fat, it makes more sense for quick food evaluations to use a guideline of 50 percent rather than 30. Just add the protein and carbohydrate numbers and divide by two. If that number is larger than the fat number, more than 50 percent of the calories are from protein and carbohydrate. If it's smaller than the fat number, the food is more than 50 percent fat.

Labeling legislation is not enough

Whatever new system lies ahead, neither the simplest graphics nor a multipaneled fold-out label can substitute for consumer education. Congress will have done only half its job by revising labeling regulations unless legislators also vote for consumer education funds for the Extension Service and other government agencies which can explain the system to the public.

Nutrition educators who can assess whether a proposed system lends itself to progressive teaching models have as much, perhaps more, to contribute to the legislative decision we face as do lawyers and biomedical scientists.

Consumers have responsibilities, too. Unless they are willing to have government act as a surrogate parent and tell them which foods are good or bad for them, they must invest some time in understanding the label.

The label cannot do everything. But it can do some things well. Our challenge is to use its strengths and to build in the potential for complementing efforts that are designed for education and other purposes.

Kristen McNutt is President of Consumer Choices Unlimited, Inc. and Editor of Consumer Magazines Digest which summarizes the critical nutrition and food safety articles in more than forty popular magazines. Comments and inquiries about this column should be sent to her at 1742 Asbury Avenue, Evanston, IL 60201.